

Series 1999-2000

CIRCULAR LETTER: C-7

TO: Superintendents of Schools and Requestors of Information

FROM: Theodore S. Sergi
Commissioner of Education

DATE: October 19, 1999

SUBJECT: Identification of Priority Schools: See Attached Memorandum

We have received Freedom of Information (FOI) requests for information related to our recent identification of 28 priority schools. The requests range from identifying additional schools to calculating different kinds of rankings of all schools.

The criteria used to identify the 28 priority schools cannot be prepared as one rank-ordered list. We utilized multi-criteria (three) of: 1998 scores, and the weighted average of '97 and '98 scores; and then the sum of the weighted average and the '97 to '98 growth (adjusted by state average growth) to those schools below indices of 40. A school needed to be below 40 on all three measures to be included on the list. These schools represent those with the lowest achievement and the greatest need. The list of priority schools was prepared solely to respond to the requirements of Public Act 99-288.

We cannot create additional lists which include larger numbers of schools without establishing different criteria and applying those criteria to all schools, as has also been requested.

What we are providing to requestors is a list of 1997 and 1998 index scores alphabetically for all schools within all districts. This information has previously been distributed to those districts with Title I schools. For the purposes of this index, student scores on the Connecticut Mastery Test (CMT) are attributed to the school in which the student attended the year before the CMT administration.

Please note that the Connecticut State Department of Education believes it is inappropriate to rank order the 28 priority schools and/or the other schools in the state on these measures. Rank ordering over-emphasizes very insignificant differences, and distorts a district's actual student achievement (measured against specific learning criteria). Furthermore, such a ranking contradicts the purposes of the CMT and Public Act 99-288, which include a process for continuous improvement and for focusing on our greatest needs. Any listing of information can be misunderstood and or misused; therefore, users of this information are cautioned accordingly.

Data on district and school CMT scores, mean scores and percent of students above goal have been available in the annual *Condition of Education* for several years and will continue to be available as part of that document, and the Strategic School Profiles (SSP) at www.state.ct.us/sde

If you would like to receive the list of 1997 and 1998 school indices, please e-mail Douglas Rindone, Chief, Bureau of Student Assessment and Research (douglas.rindone@po.state.ct.us), and he will e-mail you the database.

Thank you.

TSS:aha
Attachment

**CONNECTICUT STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION
Hartford**

TO: State Board of Education

FROM: Theodore S. Sergi
Commissioner of Education

SUBJECT: October 1999 Designation of "Priority Schools" under
Public Act 99-288: An Act Concerning Education Accountability

Connecticut Public Act 99-288, Section 2 (see attached), as well as the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), requires the Connecticut State Department of Education to evaluate the academic performance of elementary and middle schools across the state. P.A. 99-288 further requires the State Board to prepare a list of elementary and middle schools, by school district, that are "in need of improvement" based on "student performance and performance trends on statewide mastery examinations." In addition, there are new Title I, early reading and bilingual accountability requirements. The SDE is designing an accountability model that responds to all of these requirements as well as the implementation of the new generations of CMT/CAPT for 2000-2001.

The intent of Public Act 99-288 is to ensure that a process is implemented to improve students' achievement in those specific schools in which students have not been demonstrating adequate academic achievement and growth, as demonstrated on the CMT. The Department has prepared a list of 28 elementary and middle schools based on relative need and practical considerations. These schools were identified based on a formula which considered student performance on the CMT across three subject areas and grade levels and reflected test score improvement (growth) as compared to the state average. The number of schools being recommended represents a quantity that the six local districts and SDE can reasonably manage through the planning, implementation and monitoring processes. This number also reflects the need to focus resources on a limited group and to have a higher probability of significant and lasting change at the school level.

As a result of considerable analyses and discussions, Department staff members and I concluded that we should:

1. use the overall index for each school which includes an aggregate of reading, writing and math scores for up to three grade levels (student scores on the CMT are attributed to the school in which the student attended the year before the CMT administration);
2. (a) measure student performance based on an average of two years of CMT data – 1998 and 1997 and (b) weight the most current year, 1998 (2/3), more than the other, 1997 (1/3);
3. identify a list of schools with an index score of less than 40 (schools with an index of 40 or higher in 1998 or an average weighted score of 40 or higher for 1997 and 1998 were not considered);
4. calculate performance trend based on the change in CMT scores from 1997 to 1998 divided by the state average (2.3 index points); and
5. exclude from the list schools for which the sum of the performance trend and the student performance index equaled 40 or more.

This process yields 28 schools in 6 school districts. The three numbers are the 1998 index, the weighted 1998/1997 average, the weighted average plus standardized growth and they are as follows:

Bridgeport	Hartford	New Haven	New London	Waterbury	Windham
Beardsley 39,38.5,39.2	Batchelder 37,37.5,36.9	Clemente Middle 35.4,30.8,36.8	Edgerton 35.5,36.7,35.1	Driggs 37,35.4,37.5	Natchaug 35.7,36.6,35.5
Columbus 38.8,37.2,39.3	Betances 26,25.4,26.1	Clinton Avenue 37.3,38.6,36.8		Hopeville 37.2,34.2,38.1	
Madison 38.8,38.5,38.9	Burr 34.5,35,34.3	Fair Haven Middle 34,31.4,34.8			
	Hooker 27.7,25.3,28.5	Lincoln-Bassett 32.1,31.2,32.3			
	Kinsella 30.8,27.7,31.7	Hill Central 35.4,32.4,36.4			
	M.D.Fox Elem. 31.3,31.8,31.1	Mauro 37.5,35.2,38.2			
	Milner 31.5,33.2,31	Prince 31.8,30.4,32.2			
	Moylan/ McDonough 31.2,31.5,31.1	Quinnipiac 38.3,38.9,38.1			
	Sanchez 29.4,30.5,29	J.Robinson Middle 26.9,26.3,27.1			
	SAND Everywhere 31.2,28.8,32	Truman 37.7,35.1,38.5			
	West Middle 39.2,36.9,39.9				

Please note that this agency believes it is inappropriate to rank order these schools and/or others in the state on these measures. Rank ordering over-emphasizes very insignificant differences. Such a ranking would contradict the purposes of the CMT and Public Act 99-288, which include a process of continuous improvement and for focusing on our greatest needs.

A school's performance index of 40 is based on student performance on the CMT in 3 subject areas and up to 3 grade levels in one year and translates to an average distribution of:

- 40% of students scoring below the remedial level;
- 40% of students scoring above the remedial level but below the goal level; and
- 20% of the students reaching the goal level or above.

While there are several variables and combinations of variables that result in an index of 40, it is helpful to understand the general characteristics of a school at this level. The average index for ERG I communities for 1998 was 46.9, compared with a state average of 73.7.

Please note that this specific identification process will likely only be used this year. The next identification is to take place in October 2001 and will be based on the new generation of the CMT – new in the 2000-01 school year – and therefore the relative and absolute scores will be changing.

Context

The best way to characterize these schools is to say that these are the schools in our state with the most difficult job. These are schools with a high proportion of students from families below the poverty level, and often from families whose first language is other than English. These “priority schools” are identified to begin a specific process to improve student learning. They should be priorities for our attention, efforts, resources and new initiatives. There is no room for blame – only for specific efforts that will help students learn more and experience success. We encourage each local school board, community and school to immediately identify student needs and take specific steps to meet those needs.

Schools can and do make a significant difference in the lives of their students, and these schools can and will improve. Identifying the need to change, focusing on a locally developed school improvement plan and receiving additional assistance and support from many partners will hasten the improvement.

Too much is often made of the rank ordering of schools and districts in any one year – when in fact the continuous growth within a district or school, over several years, should be the key criterion for success. Too much can also be made of one test score when we are working for all students to:

read, write, compute, solve problems, learn independently, work successfully with others, enjoy and perform in the arts and athletics, act responsibly, contribute to their communities, graduate from high school, and move on to productive work, further study, responsible citizenship and lifelong learning and health.

Commissioner's Back to School Message, August 1999

It should be noted that the development of a list of priority schools does not diminish progress that has been made:

- within the last three years, ERG I (made up of seven cities) has begun to close the gap with the state average in both CMT and CAPT;
- the New Haven Public Schools are receiving the largest “Student Achievement Improvement” grant for 1999-2000, approximately \$81,000 of \$1.5 million budgeted, for the largest pupil weighted growth in the percentage of students achieving the state goal, from 1997 to 1998 (the largest grant last year was awarded to Hartford);
- each of these six cities and each of these schools have had some progress over the last few years – but not as much as others, and not enough to move them above the index score of 40;

- this list of 28 priority schools does not imply that all other schools are doing fine. Every school should be striving for annual continuous improvement in all its measures of student achievement; and
- the state's priority school district grant, early reading success grant, and others have been and will continue to assist these districts and schools.

Process – Next Steps

Public Act 99-288 statute requires:

- a meeting of superintendents and the Commissioner to discuss the process for improving school performance, on or before January 1, 2000;
- the development of a school improvement plan to be approved by the local board of education and implemented by July 1, 2000;
- each school to begin the accreditation process with the New England Association of Schools and Colleges;
- the improvement plan to be developed in consultation with the school's principal, teachers and parents of students attending the school; and
- the local board to monitor progress and, if two years after date of approval of the plan the local board finds the school has not made "sufficient progress," the board shall take one or more actions: (1) close and reconstitute; (2) restructure grades and programs; (3) provide site-based management; and (4) provide interdistrict choice.

The law also allows a school district with more than one school on the list to prioritize those schools and develop an implementation timetable for each school. This plan must be approved by the Commissioner. Although no direct state aid for these "priority schools" is appropriated at this time, (an appropriation has been proposed by some legislative leaders) the Commissioner is authorized to require a local board to reallocate state and federal categorical funds awarded to these districts in support of their "priority schools."

Conclusion

We know many things about enhancing student achievement – but the absolute basics include:

- (1) maintaining high expectations for students and staff and acting on those expectations;
- (2) not searching for one quick fix or simple solutions – using, instead, multiple strategies thorough planning and commitment to the long-term; and
- (3) involving all members of the school, family and community in the effort – each with a unique and complementary role.

The schools on this list and their students are not failing. Rather, our whole system has failed in its obligation to reach these children and these schools. We will continue to fail if we don't believe we can do better, if we give up or don't try. Conversely, the spirit of continuous improvement implies never declaring victory.

The students and parents of these schools should understand that more attention and more help will be provided to their schools. Teachers and other staff members should consider how they can dramatically change the learning experiences for students, and school boards and administrators must provide leadership that is grounded in high expectations, perseverance and the relentless pursuit of progress. Students should reflect on their role in and responsibility for their own learning. Community and business organizations, regional and state agencies and higher education institutions must all help, if we are to close the gap and reach every student.

The staff and resources of the State Department of Education will be devoted to providing assistance and support in the development and implementation of the school plans. Local/state partnerships have been in place in Hartford, Bridgeport and New Haven, and we have already begun to develop partnerships in the other three cities.

We have much to be proud of in Connecticut –continued growth in student achievement, outstanding student performance on national tests, reduction in dropout rates, and more students continuing their education beyond high school. In addition, our urban schools have demonstrated that they are beginning to close the achievement gap. Greater pride will come when we reach **all Connecticut students**. Implementation of Public Act 99-288 is an important part of that effort.

October 6, 1999